

The Modern Struggle for Black Freedom – From World War Two to Obama

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Week One:

Session One: Introduction

Session Two: Wartime & Equality

Historian Richard Dalfiume has described World War II as the ‘forgotten years of the Negro revolution’. During the conflict African Americans fought a war on two fronts. Although unprecedented numbers of black men and women served in the United States Army, African Americans continued to suffer discrimination and prejudice in civilian life. Furthermore, on the home front, black workers sought to expand their opportunities and gain equal rights on the shop floors of America’s defence contractors. What kind of freedom were these workers fighting for?

Week Two

Session Three: Cold War Civil Rights

From the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the United States was gripped by an epidemic of concern over the threat of communism. Politicians of different parties raised the threat of communism as a way of justifying new foreign policy positions, or, by promoting fears of domestic communist infiltration and subversion, to attack domestic political and cultural opponents. This climate affected who could protest for black equality and how they could do it. While the “red scare” damaged some aspects of the struggle for black equality, it also forced open new avenues of protest.

Session Four: The Modern Civil Rights Movement 1955-1968

During the 1950s and 1960s African Americans took to the streets across the southern states in direct action protests against racial segregation. These protests were characterised by the non-violent approach of the demonstrators, who refused to retaliate in the face of white intimidation and violence. Yet understanding the aims and goals of the movement is not always straightforward, especially as divisions between various aspects of the Civil Rights Movement became increasingly apparent over time. We will consider the varied agenda of the movement, its relationship with the media and government, what it achieved and where it failed.

Week Three

Session Five: Malcolm X & Black Power 1955-1975

Parallel to the non-violent direct action movement against racial segregation in the southern states, Malcolm X sought to mobilise the black under-classes of the northern ghettos. Malcolm preached a political philosophy that appeared diametrically opposed to that of King. Where King attempted to secure the integration of the races through a strategy of non-violence, Malcolm demanded total separation of blacks and whites and spoke in apocalyptic terms of an impending revolution. From 1965 onward, elements of Malcolm’s militant analysis became increasingly popular within a younger generation of black activists.

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Session Six: Struggle through Song & Sport: Black Culture And The Fight For Freedom

In the 1950s and early 1960s, black popular music articulated a new mood of optimism about the possibility of African American integration into a racially egalitarian society. When that optimism started to erode in the face of white resistance, new forms of music emerged that represented a radical assertion of black racial pride. In parallel to developments in popular music, sports also continued to offer an avenue for personal advancement and self-expression. The desegregation of sports was part of the larger civil rights revolution that occurred after World War II. Black success in integrated sports became a powerful symbol of racial pride. Through examining the career of Muhammad Ali we will consider how the worlds of race, politics, and sport intersected and influenced each other.

Week Four

Session Seven: The Rise of Two Black Americas 1970-2004

In the four decades since the end of the civil rights movement, many African Americans have achieved a good deal of economic success, with a black middle class growing stronger year-on-year. Equally, mainstream American culture gradually embraced black artists and performers, while assimilating black music into the majority culture on terms far more favourable than had been the case in the past. Yet while many African Americans could be said to have 'made it', many others languished in poverty and despair. In 1992, Los Angeles erupted in violence in the aftermath of the acquittal of police officers who had beaten Rodney King, a black motorist. Yet the violence was about more than the verdict: it appeared to reveal the existence of a multi-racial underclass with a significant black populous. Twelve years later, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina it was evident that this underclass had borne the brunt of the natural catastrophe. In this class we will investigate how and why black America has developed in the way it has done.

Session Eight: From Protest to Politics to the Presidency

From 1965, the United States saw a dramatic rise in the number of African-Americans holding high office – on the US Supreme Court, in Congress, at the state level, and in city government. But what did this breakthrough in political representation mean for the fortunes of the wider black community; how did black office-holders meet the pressing needs of their own communities while balancing them with the wider interests of all the constituents they governed? Meanwhile, at the national level, in 1984, Jesse Jackson mounted the first of two campaigns to seek the nomination. Both attempts failed. Was Jackson's a consequence of his campaign, his politics, or white doubts about a black candidate? By contrast, we will consider how and why Barack Obama was able to achieve both the nomination of his party and win the presidential election in 2008.

Assessment

The course grade is based on the assessment of three aspects of the students' participation.

- Class Presentation: 20%
- Course report (20%) based on participation in class
- Essay (2000 words): 60%

Short Representative Bibliography

Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks And Equality, 1890-2000* (2002).

Manning Marable *Race, Reform & Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction In Black America, 1945-2006* (2007).

Clayborne Carson et al, eds., *Eyes On The Prize: America's Civil Rights Years: A Reader And Guide* (1987).

Steven F. Lawson, *Running For Freedom: Civil Rights & Black Politics in America Since 1941* 3rd ed. (1996).